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## THE RESEARCH HISTORY OF SHRINKING CITIES: A CONCEPT OR NOT?

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### ABSTRACT

*Shrinking cities have become a well-known phenomenon in the current urbanisation. The topic of urban shrinking and shrinking cities as their spatial manifestation have been exploited in several international and regional projects and through numerous independent research works. Yet, the existence of specific concept concerning shrinking cities is still questionable in some circles. However, this is not unusual for topics of international consideration; many globally developed and applied urban concepts carry the same doubts, arisen from their general approach to encompass case studies at all meridians. The aim of this paper is to discuss if the concept of shrinking cities exists as an independent system in contemporary urban theory, as well as in related media coverage and practice. This is examined through the explanation of the development history of the research on shrinking cities, including the most important thoughts relating it as a theoretical concept. The paper passes through several development phases of the concept: from its negation, through formalisation, to general acceptance and exploitation by mass-media. The complexity of the development trajectory of the research of this topic confirms that the concept of shrinking cities matters, which is explained in the paper conclusion.*

**Keywords:** *shrinking cities, conceptualisation, internationalisation, urban studies, theoretical development*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of shrinking cities has been well-known throughout the history of urbanisation; population decline in cities due to different causes has been common since the appearance of the first cities (Bernt et al, 2012). Nevertheless, only in the last decades the frequency of urban shrinkage in the different parts of the world, as well as severity of this process in some cases have attracted the attention of scientific and expert circles (Wiechmann & Martinez-Fernandez, 2013; Richardson & Nam, 2014).

Global interest relating the research on shrinking cities has been evident in last two decades. However, there were initial doubts if the term of shrinking cities can be settled. Some experts concluded that it was impossible to define properly urban shrinkage due to its frequency and global prevalence (Avila de Sousa et al, 2011). This caused significant discussions how to define the phenomenon of urban shrinkage or a shrinking city its spatial representation among scholars in the initial years of the research (Pallagst, 2008; Fol & Cunningham-Sabot, 2010; Neill & Schlappa, 2016). The starting point in such discussions was urban demographics as a constant; population loss in a certain urban area is always seen as a key criterion to determine an urban shrinkage (Rieniets, 2006). Nevertheless, many questions arose in the first years of research. For example, if just demographic parameters are enough for this definition, how to characterise an urban area or how many years should be studied as critical to identify urban shrinkage or growth (Stryjakiewicz, 2013). Many scientists have realised that the process of urban shrinkage is complex and multi-layer; “A ‘shrinking city’ can be defined as an urban area that has experienced population loss, economic downturn and social problems as symptoms of a structural crisis” (Cunningham-Sabot et al, 2013, p. 14). Finally, Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCIRN), which is the international board of experts in urban studies, gave the definition of shrinking city. “A shrinking city is a densely populated urban area that has on the one hand faced a population loss in

large parts of it (for at least 5 years, more than 0.15% annually), and is on the other hand undergoing economic transformation with some symptoms of a structural crisis” (Wiechmann, 2006, p. 7). This means that several aspects matter in this process: demographic, economic, temporal, physical, and functional ones.

The biggest challenge for the concept of shrinking cities, as well as for any international concept, is to cover global perspective of a focused phenomenon. There are even thoughts that the term *shrinking city* is intentionally internationalised to enable the creation of such internationally credited concept (Fol & Cunningham-Sabot, 2010). Nevertheless, this process has been followed with a lot of scepticism. Some scholars think that this concept does not present anything new. The already established the concepts of smart shrinkage and urban regeneration cover the essence of the process of urban shrinkage (Brandes Gratz, 2010). Olsen (2013) implies that the concept of shrinking cities is actually an amalgam of the other theoretical concepts. The others are fewer sceptics by having a stance that the formation of the concept is very complicated and still in progress (Guimarães et al, 2015). Hence, the existence of specific concept concerning shrinking cities is still questionable in some scientific circles.

The aim of this paper is to discuss if the concept of shrinking cities exists as an independent system in contemporary urban theory, as well as in related media coverage and practice. This is examined through the explanation of the chronology of the development of the research on shrinking cities, including the most important thoughts relating it as a theoretical concept. The complexity of the development trajectory of the research of this topic confirms that the concept of shrinking cities matters, which is explained in the paper conclusion.

## 2. METHOD

This paper is tailored as a theoretical review on the most significant literature and internet sources. Accordingly, the core of the paper is the presentation of three phases in the development of the concept by their chronological order. The paper therefore passes through all of them: from its negation, through formalisation, to general public acceptance seen through the exploitation of the concept by mass-media. Their explanation is the main contribution of this paper, too, because such theoretical approach has not been done till today. Thus, this is regarded as a confirmation of the concept existence.

## 3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF SHRINKING CITIES

Even though the concept of shrinking cities is not longstanding like some other ones (garden city concept, for instance), several developmental phases can be noticed from its establishment in the early 2000s:

- [1] The negation of the concept during the 2000s during its establishment;
- [2] The consolidation of the concept in the late 2000s and early 2010s; and
- [3] The general public acceptance of the concept and its promotion in mass-media in the 2010s.

As it was already mentioned, even before the establishment of the concept some scientists in the west were aware about the rising number of shrinking cities in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a topic in urban studies. This was mainly the case with the cities in the most urbanised societies, such as the USA, United Kingdom or Western Germany (Bradbury, Downs & Small, 1982; Friedrichs 1993). They used the term of urban decline to address this phenomenon (Haase et al, 2014).

### 3.1. Phase 1: Negation of the concept

From its early beginnings, the concept of shrinking has had a noticeable opposition among scientists, experts, politic elite and general public. This was especially noticeable during the 2000s, which can be named as the establishment phase of the both the term of urban shrinkage and the concept of shrinking cities. However, the visibility of fast urban shrinkage in the post-socialist cities of (East) Germany in the 1990s generated the interests (Fig. 1). The main contribution during these, initial years is given through the international project “Shrinking cities / Schrumpfende Städte” (2002-2008), led by German cultural researcher Philip Oswald. This project, based on cultural promotion of shrinking cities, had a strong visual component, which ultimately enabled the promotion and internationalisation of the term of shrinking cities.



**Figure 1:** Eisenhüttenstadt in (East) Germany – a new park on the place of removed empty residential buildings in a fast-shrinking city  
(Author: B. Antonić)

In the other side, this promotion had a strong opposition from its early beginnings. The term was marked as ‘problematic’ (Oswalt, 2005, p. 12). This was especially observable in public, where urban shrinkage had been seen as taboo topic (Kühn & Liebmann, 2012; Schlappa & Neill, 2013; Pallagst et al, 2014). The other, similarly negative connotations were also present, such as a treat, stigma, pathological phenomenon, abandonment, ruin or urban crisis (Avila de Sousa, 2010; Haase et al, 2014). The urbanisation patterns of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with the fast growing of cities during industrialisation simply shaped the common opinion that urban development is the same as urban growth and *vice versa* (Oswalt, 2005; Avila de Sousa, 2010). Nevertheless, the promotion of the term of shrinking cities by the project made an early impact on its popularisation in the cities and countries which were researched by the project (Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006).

The reason why the promotion of the term of urban shrinkage during the (late) 2000s was successful is that urban shrinkage cannot be regarded as a negative process *per se*. Even more, scientists have found some positive consequences of urban shrinkage (Großmann et al, 2008). This is especially noticeable in the cities with high population densities, where these densities influence negatively on local economy and urban life (Lewis, 2014). Hence, urban growth can also bring some negative consequences for affected cities (Oswalt, 2005). In shrinking overpopulated cities, urban shrinkage can lead to new underused and free spaces and land; more free land usually means that this important urban resource is less expensive and therefore more available (Zakirova, 2010). Urban shrinkage can also enable the better quality of urban life in the previously overpopulated cities with the new space dedicated for greenery and open public activities (Fig. 1) (Djukić et al, 2018).

The promotion of both the term and concept of shrinking cities in the 2000s was carried mainly through intensive studies on the widespread and extreme cases of shrinking cities at different levels (global, regional, national). Many researches were also concentrated to present the overview of these cities through different and illustrative data arrangements: texts, tables, graphics, maps, etc. Such efforts resulted in the wide range of different compilations regarding this topic. The best example is probably the “Atlas of Shrinking Cities” (Fig. 2), published by the “Shrinking cities” Project in 2006. The main aim of the atlas was exactly to give a global overview on the phenomenon of shrinking cities (Oswalt, 2006).



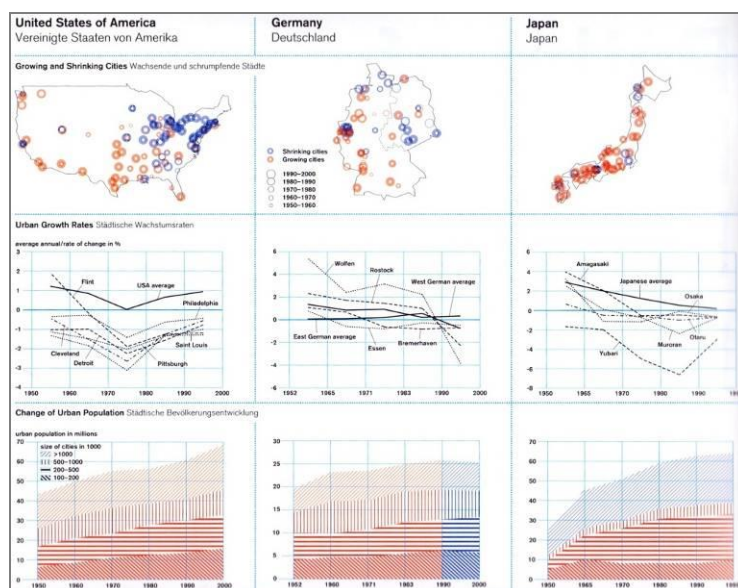


Figure 2: The extract from the “Atlas of Shrinking Cities”, which presents the different data arrangements (Source: Oswalt, 2006)

This atlas clearly showed the significance of urban shrinkage for global urbanisation. To conclude by the notion of Philip Oswalt from 2005 that the existence of many shrinking cities throughout the world implies that they cannot be considered an exception in the current urbanisation, but rather a new normality, even more visible in the future.

### 3.2. Phase 2: Consolidation of the concept

The research of urban shrinkage was in a transition from the late 2000s to 2010s. This period was marked by the first comprehensive guidelines and approaches how to overcome the problems caused by this urban process. Researcher teams from two international projects gave the main contribution: “Cities Regrowing Smaller – CIRES” COST Action (2009-2013) and “Shrink Smart – The Governance of Shrinkage” FP7 Project (2009-2012). Although both projects were mostly focused on European shrinking cities, they contributed greatly at global level. Moreover, many researchers from both projects continued to study this topic after it.

These researchers also worked on the conceptualisation of the topic of urban shrinkage. The main intention was given how to link local/national/regional approaches and works in these efforts (Großmann et al, 2013). Pallagst (2008) names them as ‘regional schools’, while Haase et al (2014) calls this situation as the ‘pluralistic world of [urban] shrinkage’ (p. 1521). The further identification of similarities and differences between these regional schools during the transition period contributed greatly to the formalisation of the concept as a coherent theoretical entity. This process was not important just relating the identification of the main features of the ongoing process of urban shrinkage, but also to settle and propose the joint approaches and models to adequately respond to urban shrinkage (Großmann et al, 2008; Haase et al, 2014; Martinez-Fernandez et al, 2016).

Three groups of thinking have been present relating this response to urban shrinkage. Many scholars underlined that the concept of shrinking cities should be properly connected to the theory of urban change (Fol & Cunningham-Sabot, 2010; Martinez-Fernandez et al, 2016). This theory says that each city passes through different phases in its development: urbanisation, suburbanisation, and deurbanisation as a final phase (Van den Berg et al, 1982). However, the second group of scholars pointed out many new examples of reurbanisation, especially among previously deurbanising Western cities (Haase et al, 2008; Couch et al, 2009). Furthermore, this process was also more related to bigger cities, under the strong influence of globalisation (Fol & Cunningham-Sabot, 2010). Finally, the last group of researchers have thought that the research of this subtopic is completely exaggerated, because reurbanisation does not mean that a city in redevelopment and revitalisation phase. In their opinion, new incentives and innovative procedures in local urban planning are crucial (Barke & Clarke, 2016).

This plurality of scientific thoughts certainly refers to the first signs of maturity of the already established concept. Nevertheless, the concept is still relative young, so it is expected that new elements will be added in the future, regardless they will be considered affirmative or challenging in the entire process (Hollander et al,

2009). Aside of this mainstream future task, a significant task is also to strengthen the concept of shrinking cities is to better connect it with the other close concepts and topics, such as an inequality in urban space or the efficient consumption of local/urban resources (Großmann et al, 2013).

### 3.3. Phase 3: General acceptance by public and mass-media

The third and current phase refers the period of the general acceptance of urban shrinkage as a new normality by public and the active promotion of both the term and concept in mass-media. This phase approximately started in the early 2010s. The main determinant is the appearance of thematic articles in mass-media. Few examples can be highlighted in the following table:

**Table 1:** The mass-media articles dedicated for the topic of shrinking cities

<i>Year</i>	<i>The title of mass-media</i>	<i>The title of Article</i>	<i>Keywords</i>
2011	<i>The Economist</i>	<i>Other shrinking cities: smaller is more beautiful</i>	<i>Figures, extremes</i>
2012	<i>The Business Insider</i>	<i>The 28 Fastest-Shrinking Cities In The World</i>	<i>The most famous examples, the largest shrinking cities</i>
2012	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Shrinking cities: are smaller economies always a bad thing?</i>	<i>Figures</i>
2015	<i>The Economist</i>	<i>How to shrink a city</i>	<i>Global forecast, mapping</i>
2016	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Shrinking cities: the rise and fall of global urban populations – mapped</i>	<i>Figures, mapping</i>
2017	<i>Financial Times</i>	<i>Shrinking cities: population decline in the world's rust-belt areas</i>	<i>Figures, comparison, mapping</i>

It is evident that the main preoccupation in these articles is the figures about shrinking cities and their geographical distribution (maps), which is the same approach as ten year before, but only in scientific circles. This can be interpreted as the same approach to convince (now) general public that shrinking cities are something normal.

Apart of this tendency, the concept of shrinking cities has become more interesting for the wider scientific audience last years. Therefore, there are first explorations of some side-topics within the concept, such as cultural heritage in shrinking cities, underused communal infrastructure or participation in urban shrinkage. The other directions are oriented towards new countries and world regions to explore their shrinking cities, such China or Latin America. These new research directions are expected with the maturity of the concept. However, they also point that the concept is still developing.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The paper presented the development history of the research of shrinking cities, arranged into three phases. Several explained elements clearly underpin that this research has been carried to unequivocally conceptualise a novel scientific theoretical corpus in urban studies:

First, key terms *urban shrinkage* and *shrinking cities* have been deeply scrutinised among scholars during two last decades of the scientific promotion of both phenomena. They were first negated, then accepted among scientists and finally among general public. This process of a step-by-step acknowledgement of key terms is typical for all important theoretical concepts.

Second, the temporal element of the concept development is also presented. The concept has passed through three distinctive phases. This process started with the research of the current state of the phenomenon, i.e. the identification of shrinking cities and their mapping. Then, the focus was reoriented towards the understanding of the causes of urban shrinkage and it finally moved to the finding of approaches and measures how to cope with urban shrinkage through the planning of urban development.

Third, the spatial development of the concept of shrinking cities is visible, too. The countries and regions researched in the first phase were those ones with widespread urban shrinkage. However, in the next two phases the spatial coverage of the research has been significantly expanded, encompassing the entire world today. This underlines the global perspective of the concept.

Taking in account all these conclusions, it is obvious that all afore mentioned scientific efforts results have results into a unique concept of shrinking cities. However, the ongoing widening of the research on shrinking cities with new subtopics and regional studies also implies that there are still the unexplored 'niches' of this

phenomenon and that the formation of the concept is not finished. Thus, the further development of the concept of shrinking cities will certainly continue in the future.

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